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SUBJECT: Next President: Kukan, Schuster, or Meciar?

¶1. Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶2. (U) Summary. As the April 3 first round of presidential elections draw near, three candidates have emerged as the strongest: Foreign Minister and SDKU candidate Eduard Kukan; President Rudolf Schuster; and HZDS Chairman and former Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar. While politicians and polls indicate Kukan is the favorite in the first round with 26-27 percent, Meciar has been gaining ground and Schuster is not so far behind. Most Slovaks agree Meciar could make it to the second round, with the most likely scenario a replay of the 2002 Parliamentary elections where HZDS appeared strong but SDKU and its allies strengthened in the end when voters recalled the reality of Slovakia's isolation under Meciar in the 1990s. The difference from 2002 is the lack of an NGO "Get Out the Vote" effort which, when combined with possible voter apathy and backlash against Kukan's SDKU party for recent economic and social reforms, could create an upset. End summary.

Kukan Still Leads Polls

¶3. (SBU) With the elections a month away, polls show a more or less consistent level of support for each candidate, but a month is a long time in Slovak politics and in the mind of the Slovak voter. Candidates have unofficially campaigned to various degrees but the two official campaign weeks immediately before the election will determine which two candidates pass to the April 17 second round. There are three realistic possibilities for the second round: (in order of likelihood) Kukan vs. Meciar, Kukan vs. Schuster, or Schuster vs. Meciar. In a February 11-17 Focus agency poll, of those who intended to vote, 27.5 percent favored Kukan, 23.1 percent supported Meciar, and 17.5 percent would vote for Schuster. In an MVK poll published March 2, when asked whom they would support in a Kukan-Meciar runoff, 62.9 percent chose Kukan and 37.1 percent selected Meciar. Virtually all contacts and voters to whom poloffs have spoken refer to each potential runoff as a "lesser of two evils" choice in which Kukan or Schuster would win against Meciar, with Kukan also likely to win over Schuster. SDKU contacts have cited current poll results as reason enough Kukan will win, but the true campaigning has yet to begin.

Meciar's Populism Has Enduring Appeal

¶4. (SBU) Meciar and HZDS still enjoy substantial popular support. The party and the man remain indivisible politically and operationally. Opposition MPs indicate many Slovaks are tired of crushing economic and social reforms and criticism from the EU and U.S., and they consider Meciar to be the only one who "stands up" for Slovakia. But many agree that Meciar, despite changing his rhetoric to support EU integration and reform, still does not have enough sympathy among the public to win and is not considered a vote for change, as much as voters may dislike their economic situation.

Schuster's Support Unclear

¶5. (SBU) Schuster may end up with Smer's endorsement, as its chairman Robert Fico has said positive things about Schuster in the media and would be unlikely to support archrival Meciar or coalition candidate Kukan. However, Schuster seems to have lost the labor unions to Meciar.

¶6. (SBU) Opposition politicians have told poloffs Kukan's poll numbers seem high considering his closeness to PM Dzurinda and public discontent over economic reforms that took place en masse at the beginning of this year. However, there are many layers between personalities and policy, and many observers doubt party affiliation or support has the same strong effect as in parliamentary elections. Thus, voters are unlikely to make this connection between the actions of the SDKU-led coalition and Kukan himself. For example, in the 1992 Parliamentary elections, voters supported a united Czechoslovakia yet voted for Meciar, whose goal was a separate Slovak state.

Comment

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17. (SBU) Meciar, if he gets to the second round, will appeal to labor unions, nationalists, and his traditional supporters. (Even Kukan's own campaign manager admitted privately that his family in eastern Slovakia would vote for no one but Meciar.) Meciar may also benefit from the widespread discontent of Roma and other socially and economically disadvantaged citizens, who are angry at the

government and so will vote against Kukan, the "government candidate". A vote "against" could combine with apathy resulting in a low turnout which could create an upset.

18. (SBU) Political analysts close to the Embassy believe those who strongly oppose Meciar and would come out specifically to vote against him outnumber his strong supporters, making the prospect of a Meciar victory possible but unlikely at this point. One respected pollster opined in the media that Meciar could win only if turnout is very low.

19. (SBU) The possibility of a Meciar victory raises the question of a U.S. response. We took an active, albeit nuanced, approach to his candidacy in 2002, including a major nonpartisan GOTV effort. No one was in doubt as to our position, which was a topic of great interest in Slovakia. So far, our position in 2004 has not been a subject of inquiry, public or private. It would be premature at this juncture for us to engage. Doing so in the current political climate might possibly enhance his attractiveness to some voters. If he gets to the second round, we will then want to consider his electoral prospects and decide how to react. End Comment.

THAYER

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